



DALE FARM TRAVELLERS BACKED BY STRASBOURG

An eviction at Dale Farm could only take place if an alternative site is made available at Pitsea, according to a recommendation by the Council of Europe, Travellers in Crays Hills were told today. (Monday, 19 Dec).

The new ground rules would compel Basildon council to seek high court authorisation before using force, thus barring direct action operations such as undertaken recently to clear plots at Hoverfields Avenue, Wickford.

Travellers' spokesman Richard Sheridan says under proposals outlined last week three conditions must be fulfilled before an eviction can go ahead:

The camp has to be illegal.

An alternative site must be available in the area.

Adequate infrastructure and facilities need to be provided on the new site.

The proposals are the result of lobbying by the new European Roma and Travellers Forum, which met in Strasbourg last week. The two UK delegates, among 75 from 42 countries representing 12 million Gypsies in Europe, were elected with the help of Travellers at Dale Farm. They are currently under threat of eviction by Basildon, which has set aside £1.9 million to level 86 homes at the settlement.

Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott has proposed that land at Terminus Drive, Pitsea, be set aside for an alternative site. It is Presently owned by English Partnership, a government regeneration Agency.

Meanwhile, as a result of planning appeals, Mr Prescott has granted eleven plot-owners at Dale Farm a further grace period of 12 months to comply with orders to leave their land. Another 40 owners are due to have their appeals heard at the end of February.

"We are glad to get the extra 12 months," said Sheridan. "But it's doubtful the proposed Pitsea site could be ready by this time next year."

However, Dale Farm residents are hopeful that the latest Council of Europe recommendations will be adopted by the government. This would stop an eviction being attempted before the Pitsea proposal has been sorted out and a proper site built there for the 600 Travellers at Crays Hill.

Regarding the cost of the new site, the Council of Europe has requested that assistance be given to such projects by its own development bank.

Crays Hill Travellers have also welcomed the proposal that an international treaty be drawn up under the council's auspices to provide a network of caravan parks across Europe. Many travel to Germany, France and Spain for business purposes during the summer months.